

Bulgarian Libraries After the Fall of Communism

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Introduction

The history of Bulgarian libraries reflects the long and tumultuous history of Bulgaria, a small country located on the Balkan Peninsula at the crossroads between Europe and Asia. The first Bulgarian libraries date back to the Middle Ages following the adoption of the Cyrillic alphabet (885-886) when Bulgarian Tsar Boris I and his son Simeon the Great (893-927) gradually started to compile collections in the palaces of the nobility. In the towns of Ohrid, Pliska and Preslav, libraries (or scriptoriums) were beginning to affirm their status as educational and spiritual centers spreading to the churches and monasteries. A remarkable literary revival known as Tarnovo Literary School united a number of prolific scholars and clergymen who not only translated Greek text but also created original works, both religious and secular. The religious books included mainly praising epistles, passionals, hagiographies, and hymns; the secular literature included chronicles, poetry, novels, apocryphical tales, popular tales, legal works, and works on medicine and natural science. After the country fell under Ottoman rule in 1396 the cultural heritage thus created was destroyed and scattered outside the borders. Only a few books were preserved and stored in the collections of surviving monasteries on the territory of the Second Bulgarian Empire, while the rest were taken outside the borders of the country.

One of the most important manuscripts of Bulgarian literature and most celebrated surviving example of Bulgarian bookmanship, the *Tetraevangelia of Ivan Alexander*, or



Credit: British Library (MS39627)

Four Gospels of Ivan Alexander, is an illuminated manuscript, written and illustrated in 1355-1356 for Tsar Ivan Alexander. The book is now part of the British Library collection (Additional MS 39627). Until the 19th century it was virtually impossible to establish libraries within the Bulgarian territory, although the country that gave humanity the Cyrillic alphabet not only managed to preserve its language, but also to rebuild its libraries after 500 years under

Ottoman rule. During the Bulgarian National Revival (Bulgarian Renaissance) in the late 18th and early 19th centuries with the development of commerce and manufacturing, a considerable number of the population began to migrate from the rural countryside toward the cities. This contributed to raising interest in secular schools and books for acquiring knowledge in arithmetic, geography, physics, and natural history. The first Bulgarian secular school, the *Aprilov Gymnasium* (High School), named after its founder Vasil Aprilov, was opened in 1835 in Gabrovo. Textbooks, aids and manuals in Bulgarian were written for its needs, which later became a standard for the secular schools. Five years after the opening of the *Aprilov Gymnasium*, its library including 3,000 volumes became the first to offer free access to its collection. Soon other schools followed in the big cities

of Svishtov, Sliven, Koprivshtitza, Kazanlak, Tryavna, to name a few. The spread of education was the core of the Bulgarian National Revival. More and more schools had been founded, each providing free education and supplemented with “*chitalishte*” (translated as “reading room”). First *chitalishte* appeared in Svishtov in 1856 and soon these unique Bulgarian cultural and educational centers spread across the country. After the end of the Crimean war in 1856, a bill passed by the Ottoman government granted civil rights to all subjects and thus played a triggering role inducing unprecedented economic uplift across the ruled territory. Thus wealthy public-spirited tradesmen were the driving force behind the *chitalishte* institution that served as an agent of social and community development and progress. The founders’ noble efforts were supported by many teachers who were aware of the need for accessible public libraries and were acting as librarians. The *chitalishte*, as a unique cultural and educational institution, was the forerunner of Bulgaria’s current library system. More than just a small library, the *chitalishte* was a place for lectures, meetings, plays, concerts, and social events. It was a place where illuminating *skazki* (translated as public speeches or talks) were delivered by prominent intellectuals who summarized the latest news and events in accessible form, easily understood by the wide audience. Such talks given by public demand in turn triggered spirited debates and exchange of thoughts and opinions. These cultural and educational strongholds played a very important role in the struggle for freedom and independence when Bulgaria was under the rule of the Ottoman Empire and its Church was still under Greek control. Opening a *chitalishte* at that time was a realization of a “dual ideal in the pursuit of spiritual and political freedom”. It has to be noted that mushrooming new *chitalishte(s)* spread across the borders of the Ottoman Empire and

reached such major European cities as Odessa, Vienna, Istanbul and others with strong Bulgarian emigrant populations. By the time Bulgaria gained its independence in 1878, some 184 school libraries, 185 *chitalishte(s)*, and 32 libraries belonging to various societies had been established.

Bulgarian Libraries After the Liberation 1878-1944

In the period 1878-1944, starting with the signing of the San Stefano Treaty that gave national independence to Bulgaria, the new state depended fully upon the *chitalishte* libraries to provide the population with much needed access to books and periodicals and therefore facilitating the development of Bulgaria's civil society. The network of the *chitalishte* library in fact was a network of reader-oriented public libraries whose main role was focused on serving as book depositories. Librarianship emerged as a profession and various training courses for librarians had been established (the first in 1923) as a precursor of professional development activities. Merely a month after signing the San Stefano Treaty, in the capital city of Sofia, Mikhail Bobotinov, a teacher and secretary at the city council, proposed to establish a "public library, necessary for the cultural and



Credit: Sts. Cyril and Methodius National Library, Sofia

educational development of Sofia" and in December 1878 the Sofia Public Library was founded, but the following year its status was quickly upgraded to National Library. Two major events consolidated the

status of the newly founded national library – in 1897 a Law of Deposit of Printed Editions in the national libraries came into force and in 1924 an Archives Department was established to house the Bulgarian National Revival Archive (founded back in 1904). The Library was named after Sts. Cyril and St. Methodius, the eponymous brothers who invented the Cyrillic alphabet in the late ninth century. Their monument with the Cyrillic alphabet in their hands stands tall in front of the Library and is one of the city's landmarks. Another landmark library, the Central Library of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (CL-BAS), established by emigrants from Braila, Romania in 1869 as a book collection of the Bulgarian Learned Society, is the first Bulgarian scientific library. After the Liberation the Library stacks were transferred to Sofia where it resumed its activities in 1882. Originally the first Bulgarian scientific library was funded by a joint effort of numerous donors and international publication exchange. After 1911 the Library grew into a national academic library, holding valuable sources for Bulgarian history, as well as publications of leading world scientific centers. It would have been unforgivable to omit the original academic library – that of the Sofia University. The University Library “St. Kliment Ohridski” is the largest scientific library in Bulgaria. Established in 1888 to serve the School of Higher Education in Sofia and satisfy the needs for scientific literature of faculty and students. Bulgarian Alma Mater founders undertook the hard task of collecting basic writings in the field of humanities and natural sciences to the fullest extent possible, in order to affirm its status as the state's foremost information, cultural, and educational center.

In the period 1878-1944 in Bulgaria were established five national libraries (including the four filials in Plovdiv, Tarnovo, Shumen, Varna), four city libraries, three university libraries, and about 3,200 school and *chitalishte* libraries.

Bulgarian Libraries Between 1944-1989

In the 20th century, after WWII, the country fell completely under the tight control of the Soviet Union and libraries were forced to collect predominantly Russian materials. Immediately after WWII some attempts were made to rebuild the library systems in the Eastern European countries with American assistance. Bulgaria received the smallest share of books and journals under the ALA periodical purchase program that were distributed among some libraries and research institutes in Sofia and Varna. During the 1944-1989 period, library collections were completely dependent on the communist ideology of the one-party government. Under communist control the *chitalishte* libraries' role was limited to promoting political and ideological propaganda despite the undercurrent culture of dissent. Bulgarian *chitalishte* libraries lost their autonomy; their real estate and capital was expropriated and the Chitalishte Union dissolved. The management boards were replaced by clerks following instructions issued by the communist party. The libraries' collections were purged of books with fascist, chauvinist and reactionary content, which were put into "closed stacks" (translated as *spetsfunds*, abbreviation from special funds) accessible only to the members of the ruling communist party. Very often classic books in foreign languages were included into that category, which represented often a considerable part of the collections. The library system was in a state of information eclipse. The libraries were funded entirely by the state which was another way to keep them under control using their cultural influence to convey the communist ideology and to form "socialist awareness" among readers. More libraries had been opened, some existing ones were transformed into municipal libraries, and 27 new district (regional) libraries were created in the 1950s, one for each of the administrative

districts of the country. The library service gained recognition. The establishment of a Uniform (Union) Library System and National Scientific and Technical Information System, based on the Soviet model, were launched. The goal was to achieve close coordination between the 9,800 existing libraries and information units across the country and the acquisition of information resources. Despite the efforts to change the organizational structure, the lack of adequate funding caused serious delay in the introduction of new technology and especially new information technology. Another backfiring factor was the separation of library and information services; instead of collaborating, libraries and information centers went into harsh competition for the distribution of constantly diminishing funding. The equalizing in status of libraries with different performance led to loss of motivation among the ones who had initiatives. Bulgarian libraries gradually started to give in and particularly after the 1970s they fell far behind the standard in the Western world. Those challenges didn't seem to affect the mushrooming of various new libraries, whose total number exceeded 10,000 in the late 1980s. The centralized ideologically-oriented socialist model proved to be very difficult to realize and manage during that period which is often called the period of stagnation.

Bulgarian Libraries After 1989

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 the communist political and economic system collapsed, which induced a crisis in Bulgarian society and the entire library system. The reasons were not only socio-economic, but were also caused by a cultural identity paradigm shift. The transition from totalitarian regime to democratic society turned out to be marred by power struggles among the constantly changing party-political administrations. The country has to deal with unemployment and inflation which affected

the government subsidies for libraries. Academic and research libraries suffered the most – many couldn't afford acquiring new monographs or teaching resources, neither could they implement computer technology in the classrooms. As a result of the change, however, Bulgarian libraries received freedom and autonomy, and they opened the “closed stacks”, containing mainly outdated titles, and began to interact with Western peer institutions. There are several game changing projects that helped modernizing and rebuilding Bulgarian libraries during the transition period from totalitarianism to democratic society – ABLE, Gates Foundation grants (Glob@l Libraries-Bulgaria), NALIS, to mention just a few of them. The first joint project with the US was the American-Bulgarian Library Exchange (ABLE) that began in 1996 as a campaign of “partnering libraries” between American libraries in Colorado, Nancy Bolt of Nancy Bolt & Associates and eighteen Bulgarian public libraries across the country (1996-2006). The main goals of that project were to increase the capacity of Bulgarian libraries in providing community oriented information services to patrons and local government offices. The ABLE project helped transforming Bulgarian libraries to places like social interaction similar to *chitalishte* libraries and reading clubs. Some ABLE libraries offered children's activities, services to disadvantaged people, and free Internet access. Visiting American librarians trained staff of Bulgarian participating libraries to become community information centers. The Glob@l Libraries-Bulgaria program (2009-2013) was established after the success of ABLE. Glob@l Libraries - Bulgaria “is a joint initiative of the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture, the United Nations Development Programme, the Bulgarian Ministry of Transport, Information Technology and Communications, the National Association of Municipalities in Bulgaria and the Bulgarian Library and Information Association

supported by a USD 15 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Glob@Libraries - Bulgaria was designed to facilitate access to information, knowledge, communication, e-contents and community services through Bulgaria's public libraries network". The third and foremost example of achievement and cooperation between US and Bulgaria is the National Academic Library and Information System (NALIS) funded by the America for Bulgaria Foundation. The first stage of that project, launched in 2009, was the creation of local networks in more than fifty academic, research, and regional libraries, built upon NALIN (National Automated Library and Information Network), which was the predecessor of NALIS. The ultimate goal was to compile a union catalog which would make possible data and resources exchange on a local and international level. The NALIS union catalog has been available since September 2010; the network comprises 32 associate members, 19 university libraries, 8 academic libraries, and 5 large public libraries. There are many more projects that deserve to be added to the list. A noteworthy one is "Books for the Libraries" (2007), a homegrown initiative of the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture.

Grassroots Electronic Libraries

The grassroots library initiatives began to appear in Bulgaria in early 2000. Almost a decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall due to help from the EU some positive developments emerged, but by that time almost 30% of the libraries had collapsed, their collections were destroyed and buildings were privatized. During the transition period when the state did not demonstrate consistent policies and provide support for cultural institutions, including libraries, the majority of people seek to self-establish, self-regulate and self-maintain analogs of cultural establishments crashed during the crisis. For many

people these activities were perceived as expressions of newly found freedom. The Internet became fertile ground for mushrooming of “paralibrary” websites. One instance is the digital library Chitanka (<https://chitanka.info>), created by a Bulgarian student living in Germany who digitized his personal library and uploaded the files on the net in 2005. All books were free to read, download and share. Very soon other volunteers followed by uploading their own books, some out-of-print or which had been banned by the totalitarian



Credit: Chitanka.info

regime. As a landslide audiobooks followed suit, too. In 2010 GDCOC (General Directorate for Combating Organized Crime) shut down the non-commercial, open and collaborative Chitanka, but by that time

it was very popular for its *samizdat* like mission. Closing Chitanka triggered a huge scandal and polemics about copyright infringement and it re-appeared shortly after. This example illustrates how piracy as a bottom-up initiative compensates for the lack of successful public policies. Another web site Slovo.bg holds legitimate copies of Bulgarian classics already existing in the public domain. Currently there are several digitization projects underway endorsed by the government, that have to fill that void eventually: National Program “Digital Bulgaria 2025” (Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria,

2019), "Strategy of the Archives State Agency for 2016-2020" and "Digitization and Preservation of the Written Heritage of Bulgaria" to name a few of them.

Conclusion

In the course of more than 1300 turbulent years Bulgarian libraries have been the pillar of Slavic literacy, culture, and national identity. Bulgarian libraries survived through foreign invasions, financial crises, and political anarchy, reinventing themselves from traditional keepers of books and guardians of national heritage into modern patron-oriented community information centers. They continue to evolve following social, economic, and political changes by adopting foreign ideas and accepting international support, striving to find their rightful place on the world's cultural scene.

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